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Hunger on Rise in California, Study Finds

Almost 3 million poor adults said they had daily trouble acquiring food in 2003. The percentage rose nearly five points from 2001.

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Hunger and poor nutrition are increasing in California, with nearly 3 million low-income adults reporting that they struggle each day to keep food on the table, according to a study released Tuesday by UCLA researchers.

Nearly 34% of low-income adults in 2003 said they had to make a daily decision about whether to eat or pay for other necessities such as shelter or medical care, up from 29% in 2001.

The increases contrasted with national estimates, which showed little change over the same period, the study's authors said. California ranks 15th worst among the states for food insecurity, according to the U.S. Agriculture Department, which conducts an annual national household survey.

Food insecurity was defined as the lack of "assured access" to enough nutritious food.

"The elderly, the employed, the unemployed, families with children — no matter how you cut it there were increases in their inability to obtain food, and that indicates a systemic problem in the state rather than a localized one," said lead investigator Gail Harrison, a public health professor at UCLA.

Harrison said several factors may be at work, including growing housing and healthcare costs, low wages and difficulty in obtaining federal food stamps. The study concluded that the Food Stamp Program has been particularly underutilized in California. Of those adults who were eligible and reported episodes of hunger, fewer than 18% received food stamps.

Though food stamp participation in California has increased slightly over the last five years, underutilization still means the state loses an estimated \$1.6 billion annually in federal funds, according to California Food Policy Advocates, which collaborated on the study.

The Legislature is considering several hunger-related measures, and this week the Assembly advanced a bill that would allow those seeking food stamps but no cash aid to forgo getting a finger image check for fraud.

The UCLA study was based on findings from the 2003 California Health Interview Survey, which covered various public health topics. The conclusions about hunger were culled from nearly 12,000 interviews with

adults living in households with incomes below 200% of the poverty level, or about \$32,180 annually for a family of three. The study was timed for release on National Hunger Awareness Day on Tuesday.

Two of the most vulnerable populations — the elderly and pregnant women — were among those reporting the most dramatic increases in food insecurity, according to the report. Among low-income adults 65 and older, 20% lacked sufficient food in 2003, up from 16% in 2001. And among pregnant women ages 18 to 44, nearly 41% lacked enough food, compared with 16% in 2001.

Food insecurity was the highest in the Central Valley counties of Kern and Tulare — among the most abundant agricultural regions in the world — and lowest in Marin and the far northern counties of Siskiyou, Lassen, Trinity and Modoc. In Los Angeles, 34% of low-income adults — about 957,000 people — experienced periods when they could not afford enough food in 2003, up from 31% in 2001.

The authors said they were puzzled by the increases in the number of low-income adults who faced hunger in Napa (42%) and San Mateo (41%) counties. They theorized that people moved to the areas in search of low-cost housing and were unable to make ends meet.

The study also found that 34% of low-income adults who reported inadequate food worked full-time.

"That's something that has been pretty constant over the years, and it's troubling," said co-author George Manalo-LeClair, director of legislation for California Food Policy Advocates. "We want work to pay and we hope hard-working folks can afford to feed their family, and what the data is showing is it's not necessarily the case."

The numbers reflect a growing demand on food programs and other charities, said Michael Flood, executive director of the Los Angeles Regional Foodbank. The agency distributed about 45 million pounds of food in 2004 — about a 5% increase over the previous year. The boost represented about 1.6 million additional meals, he said.